THE INTERNATIONAL STUDIO GLASS MOVEMENT

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THE INTERNATIONAL STUDIO GLASS MOVEMENT

EUROPE - THE BACKGROUND

The beginning of the International Studio Glass Movement is attributed to Harvey Littleton in the United States of America in 1962. But as with everything there is a basis on which this beginning was built, and this foundation was Europe.

Over the centuries Europe had developed a long tradition in glass. The objects made were primarily functional - tableware and windows. The level of craftsmanship was high even though the art content often made the function of secondary importance.[1] With the advent of industrialization and the consequent mechanization of the glass industry craftsmanship deteriorated and individual handmade objects became scarce. However the upsurge in the economic and cultural climate which followed World War I revived interest in quality work. Glass factories flourished with industrial glass designers working within the factory system. Although this development was interrupted by World War II it was vigorously renewed as the rebuilding of war-torn Europe began.

Innovations taking place at this time brought great changes to glass technology in manufacture, glass quality and uses, particularly in architecture. This information was passed on to designers working in glass, greatly affecting their work.[2]

The reaction against mass production created prestige studio departments within the major glass-works exclusively for the design of art glass. These companies competed against each other at industrial fairs, notably

the World Fairs and the Milan Triennale, where they aimed for maximum exposure and publicity by unveiling new ideas .[3]

The designers in general had no practical experience with the material. They designed on paper and in isolation from the factory floor and these designs were then interpreted by master craftsmen.

Prior to World War II France was the leader of the modern movement in glass with the very traditional work of Daum and Lalique.[4] After the war however the Scandinavian countries were dominant. The Swedes particularly were the most innovative, with excellent craftsmanship, and it was here that the studio movement had its earliest stirrings. The glass was designed and made by a team. Highly skilled craftsmen, each specializing in different skills, worked closely with the designer who understood and appreciated the properties of the glass from observation. In some cases the designer was also the master blower and so had first hand experience of his material. The emphasis on co-operation was great. Lars Hellsten said:

> "I am one in a team....It starts with an idea.... I work very little on paper...as I know that a lot will change and be modified as we work along....To be able to succeed with my idea, it is important that the craftsman and I discuss what we are about to create." 5

By the 1950's Czechoslovakian artists came to prominence. While the Scandinavian countries, with Finland now setting the standards for European design, concentrated on functional hand-crafted objects, the Czechs used glass as a means of free artistic expression in a sculptural form.[6] They broke away from traditional techniques and forms and the means by which they did this was their training. Most had gone through the

rigorous State education programme which combines academic studies in the fine arts of painting and sculpture with the practical knowledge of glass techniques and properties.[7]

The glass industry in Czechoslovakia had been nationalised in 1948 and the State was interested in promoting the tradition of Bohemian glass.[8] Artists were supported in experimentation and in large scale architectural works and these progressive designs were exhibited, after years of Czech isolation, in the Milan Triennales of 1957 and 1960 and the Brussels World Fair of 1958.[9]

The development in Czech glass was a reaction against the automation of the glass industry, by finding a more individual and expressive way of working through personal contact with the material.[10]

So in Europe the seeds for the studio glass movement were sown - in Scandinavia through the close contact and co-operation of designer and craftsman, and in Czechoslovakia through the excellent training in both artistic and theoretical application.

In general the reason Europe did not progress to a less restrictive glass art was that it was so strongly bound by tradition that artists found it difficult to break away and attempt more innovative work. Naturally there were exceptions such as the Dutch industrial designer Andries Copier who as early as 1958 was experimenting with non-functional free-blown forms in his Leerdham Glassworks.[11] But this was not the norm. And so it was in the youthful country of the United States of America that glass tradition was broken.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA - THE BEGINNING

The United States had some history of glass. Maurice Heaton, Frances and Michael Higgins, and Edris Eckhardt were the pioneers of the American studio glass movement, and all were included in Corning's "Glass 1959" exhibition. These craftsmen designed and made their own work in the true studio manner.

Heaton began working in glass in 1923. His family background and early training was in stained glass, but he also worked extensively with lighting and tableware - enamelling, laminating, and slumping.

Frances and Michael Higgins began in the late 1940's working with silkscreened enamels and fusing on tableware, jewellery and windows.

Eckhardt was a sculptor. Working with 3-dimensional forms she began making her own coloured glass in 1952 and has mastered an astounding number of techniques among which are laminating gold foil, sculptural casting, and a method of casting glass into bronze in which she perfected a bronze alloy that combines with glass without shrinking.[12]

But these artists had no great impact on the studio glass movement which came about through a series of related events which influenced attitudes to all the arts and crafts as well as glass.

As a direct result of the late 1950's 'space race' with the Russians massive Federal Government funding had been poured into scientifically based education to produce technocrats. In reaction to this the mid 1960's saw a trickle of funds directed towards the arts, with the consequent expansion of college and university

facilities. Because of the possibility of getting Federal funding for urban redevelopment there was a move to centralize the arts, with a resultant increase in the number of cultural centres and arts organizations. Also with the population increase after World War II the working week was reduced and leisure time increased so that more people became involved as both participants and audience.[13] All of a sudden the arts were good for business.

The climate in the States in the 1960's was one of tolerance for everything experimental. Abstract art had gained acceptance by the average man since its first controversial introduction in 1913.[14] The emphasis in education was on 'self-expression' and creativity, and whereas earlier American collectors revered the European artist, since the 1950's the New York School of Abstract Expressionists, which included such artists as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, were turning the eyes of Europe to America. There was a new self-confidence in the American art scene and with this the growth of the 1960's 'counter-culture' movement and the attendant crafts movement.[15] Many people turned from the materialistic society to self-fulfillment through artistic endeavours, and this increased interest channelled funds into experimental groups in the arts and crafts fields. Harvey Littleton was a recipient of funding to experiment with glass.[16]

Harvey Littleton grew up in Corning, New York State, where his father was a research director for the Corning Glass Company, the most important industrial glass maker of art glass in the USA.[17] During the summers he worked in the factory, making cast pieces.[18] Because of the cost and the necessity of elaborate equipment Littleton did not consider the possibility of working with glass outside the confines of the factory and turned instead

to pottery, which he taught at the University of Wisconsin. The study of crafts had become acceptable within the American higher education system through Bauhaus and other European intellectuals. However this acceptance did not encompass glass which followed the old pattern - principles of design were taught through industrial design courses, but practical aspects were taught at technical schools.[19]

In 1957 Littleton travelled to Europe on an educational glass tour. Here he met Jean Sala who had had his own studio furnace in France as early as the 1930's, and he saw small furnaces in workshops in Italy, in Naples and Murano.[20] He had further stimulation through visiting the Italian Venini Glassworks in 1959, and meeting new-wave European glass artist Erwin Eisch.

In 1962 Harvey Littleton received a grant from the Toledo Museum and the Ohio Council for the Arts to hold a glass workshop in a garage behind the museum. It was during this workshop, fraught with disasters, that Dominik Labino became involved. Then research vice-president of Johns-Mauville Fibre Glass Corporation he later took part in the studio movement as an artist. It was Labino who provided the technical information to produce molten glass at lower temperatures than in commercial factories, and he also invented a small cost-efficient furnace suitable for a studio or classroom situation.[21]

Littleton next built a furnace at the University of Wisconsin and started the first credit-bearing glass course in the USA. There are now in 1988 seventy-one institutions teaching glass.[22]

These first experiments in glass were mainly blown free-form solutions. It is only relatively recently that such

techniques as casting, coldworking and mixed media have been used. The students and the teacher were untrained and had to experiment with both materials and techniques. In contrast to the secrecy of the European situation in the States, where all were equal novices, everyone shared their findings, gleaning extra information from the industry. In this atmosphere of great excitement the work was spontaneous and refreshing and it managed to keep these qualities as the skills of the glassblowers improved.[23]

Glass had finally become the tool of the artist. Working directly with the material he had individual control over conception and execution. The movement was greatly influenced by Pop Art. Glass was a new material for artists of this generation who used it as an expressive medium. As Erwin Eisch so aptly expressed it - "art for its own functionless sake".[24]

As the technical inadequacies of the Americans became more apparent to themselves a dialogue was setup with glass makers and artists from Europe. Conferences and workshops were organised, and American artists travelled to Europe to learn.[25]

The recognition of glass studies by the universities led to its acceptance by museums so that exhibitions began to appear. Catalogues were published in conjunction with these and became reference material for other artists. This led to specialist glass art magazines.

In the early 1970's American glass was exhibited in Europe and Japan, and at the end of the decade in Australia, greatly influencing the spread of the International studio glass movement. Commercial galleries began to promote and sell contemporary glass

and a lucrative collectors market developed in the United States which is very slowly spreading to other countries. Glass has become an acceptable contemporary art form.

AUSTRALIA

The glass movement in Australia began some years after Harvey Littleton's initial experiments, and was greatly influenced by overseas trends. Australia had no national glass entity and had only a meagre history in glass. Until the 1840's all functional and luxury glass was imported and even today much still is.

During the colonial era studios existed for making stained glass windows and the development of this area has been gradual but steady. Small blowing workshops existed at this time manufacturing bottles and jars. These businesses found it difficult to compete with the traditional glass centres of industrialised Britain, Europe and America and the glass industry was virtually ruined by the economic depression of the 1930's. Small companies were incorporated into AGM (Australian Glass Manufacture) which later became ACI (Australian Consolidated Industries) and luxury stained glass was all but eliminated. The only luxury glass was made by 'Crown Crystal' in Sydney[26] and this closed in the 1960's leaving Leonora Glass in Newcastle which has since also closed.

After World War II Australia followed much the same pattern as America. The British cultural dominance was superceded by a multiculturalism as immigrants from Europe settled the country. Australia became a more interesting place to live both culturally and socially. The 1950's and 60's brought an upsurge in national pride which was strengthened as more and more Australians travelled abroad and realized the worth of their home country. Artists and intellectuals fought to overcome the feelings of inadequacy which had been impressed upon them through isolation from the important cultural centres of the world.[27]

It was in this atmosphere of reassessment that Australian artists first became aware of the International studio glass movement. Little impact had been made by the first artists to exhibit glass - Bill Gleeson as early as 1967, and John Orval in 1970.[28] Stephen Skillitzi and Peter Minson became involved in hot glass in the early 1970's. Both individually experimented with building glass furnaces - Minson from a family background in commercial flameworking, Skillitzi from overseas experience of the innovative and sculptural Czechoslovakian glass at the Montreal Expo in 1967, and from tutoring by American glass artist Dale Chihuly. On his return to Australia he not only began working with glass but set about informing other people of the overseas glass experience.[29]

As had happened earlier in America the 1970's saw a resurgence in interest in the crafts with the consequent establishment of the Crafts Council of Australia and its State subsidiaries, and the Crafts Board of the Australia Council. The aim was to reestablish moribund crafts, such as glass, and to encourage and finance the education of artists. Between 1973 and 1978 the Crafts Board invested some $201,000 in the glass crafts.[30] This took the form of sponsoring overseas touring exhibitions and visits by international artists, grants to establish workshops, and scholarships for overseas study.

State governments also encouraged the development of the crafts by financing craft centres such as the Jam Factory in Adelaide, The Meat Market in Melbourne, and the Argyle Centre in Sydney. The Jam Factory became the principal educator in hot glass techniques when in 1974 the workshop was started by Sam Herman, a former student of Harvey Littleton. He brought with him the experience of teaching at the Royal College of the Arts and of setting up the Glasshouse workshop in London.

At this time the Crafts Board financed separate visits by American hot glass artists, Richard Marquis and Bill Boysen. Boysen set up a mobile glass furnace and travelled parts of Australia training glass blowers. Marquis took up residencies in art schools and established workshops in Melbourne and Hobart. Later he and Nick Mount also travelled with the Mobile Furnace in Tasmania.

The first touring exhibitions in 1976 were the work of 16 artists from Kosta Boda and Orrefors, and an exhibition of American glass. So from the very beginning Australians were to experience the dichotomy of the two very different worlds of glass - Europe with its characteristically simple and functional forms and restrained decorations[31], and the flamboyant, expressive sculptural style of the Americans.

Many exhibitions followed. In 1980 an exhibition of contemporary German architectural glass coupled with workshops by German artist Ludwig Schaffrath greatly influenced this field of glass design. The "international Directions in Glass Art" in 1982 was a compilation of great diversity with artists from Europe, America and Japan.[32]

These shows, along with the increased variety of international publications specialising in glass greatly stimulated and influenced Australian artists, as did the all important catalyst - education.

While stained glass already had an education background[35] 1978 saw the first degree course majoring in kiln techniques started by Maureen Cahill at Sydney College of the Arts. She had previously studied glass at Stourbridge. This course was followed by others in glass at Chisholm and Riverina Colleges of Advanced Education and the Canberra and South Australian Schools of Art.

The most influential teachers have been Klaus Zimmer, Maureen Cahill, and Klaus Moje. Zimmer at the Chisholm Institute of Technology in Melbourne, trained as a painter and printmaker in Berlin and Melbourne. He has been principally concerned with flat glass both in windows and autonomous panels. Cahill uses glass as a sculptural medium, often in installations. Moje, an internationally known German glass artist, established the glass workshop at the Canberra School of Arts (now the Canberra Institute of the Arts) in 1983 and brought with him specialist knowledge in kiln work and mosaic techniques.[36]

The influences on Australian glass artists have been varied. The number of people working in the medium has increased markedly since the 1970's as have the diversity of the techniques. The move is away from blown work to more constructions and work in mixed media. Some artists make conceptual work while others analyse natural form and colour and the properties of glass. The move towards sculptural glass is most evident in exhibition work, while, for practical reasons, namely the rarity of major exhibitions and lack of collectors, most artists have developed studio production functional ware.

While there is no national style influences are apparent as a mix of the traditional, well-crafted European glass and the more expressive American.[37]

CONCLUSION

While the beginning of the International Studio Glass Movement can be attributed to Harvey Littleton perhaps it is for the wrong reasons. As Helmut Ricke points out in his article 'Europa Vor '62', the achievements of the contemporary glass movement are less to do with the development of the small furnace than with the fact that Littleton moved the study of all aspects of glass into the American education system. Here it was taken up by 'intelligent, receptive and enthusiastic' young minds who, unhampered by centuries of tradition and the dominance of old master craftsmen, could use experimentation and innovation to create a new art form.

Ricke in fact believes that the development of the small furnace hindered the glass movement. He talks of the "amateurishness of the hot glass phase" which was fun but did not accomplish much. It was a transition phase on the way to a more expressive use of glass. He feels that the main development was the change in attitude to glass, not the availability and uses of techniques. As he points out, most of the contemporary innovations are from artists using kiln-formed techniques and cold-working and that progress would have been achieved earlier if Littleton had concentrated his energies on kiln work.

But perhaps this is not so. The allure and excitement of hot glass attracted many converts who may have ignored the slower, less dramatic kiln-formed processes so that many of these innovative artists may have been lost to the glass movement.

Looking at the achievements of the 25 years of studio glass it is apparent that glass is an extremely young craft. Artists have not had the benefit of a storehouse of knowledge such as ceramists enjoy. Time has had to

be spent developing skills and new techniques, even in the traditional area of blown glass where secrecy was the norm and artists have often had to rediscover for themselves old skills. With the necessary time being spent on this learning process, artistic development was often overlooked. Because of the inherent properties of the medium a work could achieve acclaim purely through the beauty of the glass. Through the increased exposure and education this is less likely to be the case. The public as well as the artists are beginning to evaluate the work on its artistic merit rather than on the attributes of glass alone. As Suzanne Frantz comments -

> "I envision the piece in a medium other than glass. If it is sculptural, I think of it cast in bronze. If it is pictorial, I think of the image as a painting or drawing. At that point, if it fails as a form or an image m my interest is diminished. Only after this first step do I move on to consider the work as glass." 38

Perhaps once glass is no longer considered as a separate medium it will have come of age.

FOOTNOTES

1 Libensky, Stanislav: "Glass in Europe: Some Observations", International Directions In Glass Art, The Art Gallery of Western Australia, p.19.

2 Klein, Dan and Lloyd Ward: The History of Glass, Orbis, London,1984, p.245.

3 Ibid., p.245.

4 Ibid., p.258.

5 Warff, Goran: "Adventures in Swedish Glass", Craft Australia, April,1977,p.8.

6 Ricke, Helmut: "Glass in Europe Today", World Glass Now 88, Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art, Sapporo,1988,p.156.

7 Adlerova, Alena: "Years of Change in Czechoslovakian Glass 1957-1962", Neues Glas, 1/88,p.9.

8 Klein, Dan: Op.Cit.,p.257.

9 Adlerova, Alena: Op.Cit.,p.9.

10 Ibid.,p.12.

11 Klein, Dan: Op.Cit.,p.259.

12 Hollister, Paul: "USA - Studio Glass Before 1962", Neues Glas, 4/85,pp.232-240.

13 Lynes, Russell: "1959-1979", New Glass. A Worldwide Survey, The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning,1979,p.22.

14 Ibid.,p.23.

15 Ibid.,p.24.

16 Littleton, Harvey K.: "Studio Glass Movement. Yesterday-Today-Tomorrow", Neues Glas, 4/88,p.260.

17 Klein, Dan: Op.Cit.,p.260

18 Littleton: Op.Cit.,p.260.

19 Taylor, Michael: "Glass Education in the USA", Neues Glas, 4/88,pp.290,291.

20 Hollister: Op.Cit.,p.232.

21 Klein: Op.Cit.,p.263.

22 Taylor: Op.Cit.,p.291.

23 Esson, Michael: "Selector's Comments", International Directions in Glass Art, The Art Gallery of Western Australia,p.23.

24 Klein: op.cit.,p.265.

25 Libensky: op.cit.,p.22.

26 Zimmer, Jenny: "2nd National Glass Biennial", Craft Australia, Summer 1982/4,p.iii.

27 Zimmer, Jenny: "Australian Glass", Glass From Australia and New Zealand, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt,1984,p.14.

28 Zimmer, Jenny, "Glass", Craft Australia Yearbook 1984, Crafts Council of Australia, p.51.

29 Interview with Stephen Skillitzi.

30 Zimmer: "Glass",op.cit,,p.57.

31 Andrew, Carl: "National Glass Biennial Australia", Neues Glas, 1/86,p.10.

32 Bell, Robert: "Introduction", International Directions in Glass Art, The Art Gallery of Western Australia,1982.

33 Andrew: op.cit.,p.12.

34 Anderson, Lindsay: "Education for Glass", Glass From Australia and New Zealand, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt,1984,p.24.

35 Zimmer: "Glass",op.cit.,

36 Andrew: op.cit.,p.14.

37 Zimmer, Jenny: "Overseas Studio Glass", Craft Arts, Oct/Dec 1984,p.25

38 Frantz, Suzanne K.: "On the Occasion of the 'World Glass Now 88' ", World Glass Now 88, Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art Sapporo,p.172.

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